

Embodiment and Decoration: Matisse's Rosary Chapel in Vence, France

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Although Henri Matisse's Rosary Chapel in Vence, France was completed when the artist was 82 years old, it was the first piece the painter referred to as his "masterpiece." Despite its prestige within Matisse's extensive body of work, the chapel is only framed by the art historical community in two ways: as a result of the famed elderly artist's long career in painting and as a space containing isolated works of art to be examined separately. Neither of these approaches are representative of the real significance of the Chapel as an inhabitable architectural space. Because of its multifunctional active human use and the nature of its design, it is vital to consider the Chapel as a space in which interactions amongst people, modern art, and different kinds of ritual occur. This involves moments both when the nuns, costumed priest, and parishioners engage with the space as a tool of their religious ritual worship and when non-religious visitors attend the space for a fee to experience the work of Henri Matisse. In the later moment, the function of the Chapel shifts away from the artist's intent and its religious purpose to accommodate its popularity as a work of art.

This analysis employs my personal experience and analysis of the chapel space, writings of Matisse and his collaborators, and visual documentation of the site to argue that the Chapel truly functions in a complex way that differs from the narrative previously put forth in scholarship. This paper endeavors to consider how ritual interactions occur in the Chapel and what meaning can be derived from examining how people occupy this decorative space. My research of the Rosary Chapel acts as a case study for understanding human interactions in space and gaining further meaning from art based on an examination of the environment in which it is housed in multiple historical and social contexts.

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1.0 MATISSE, HIS CHAPEL AND HIS PUBLIC

Henri Matisse's Rosary Chapel in Vence, France garnered international attention when it was consecrated in 1951. The level of attention was so great that one editorial from the *Liturgical Arts* journal published in New York City claimed: "It is doubtful that anyone even remotely interested in religious art can have escaped the barrage of publicity concerning the Chapel of the Rosary of the Dominican Sisters at Vence."¹ It was not only religious publications that published news of this site but popular and scholarly press as well. Articles on the chapel appeared in *Life*, *Vogue*, *House and Garden*, *Harper's Bazaar*, in addition to being discussed in Alfred Barr's *Matisse His Art, and His Public* published in the same year.

In a feature story in *Life* magazine Matisse is shown sitting proud and stately in the soon to be completed Chapel.² There is a strong sense that he has control of the photograph and the viewer is seeing only what the stern-faced artist permits. He is placed slightly off center, with the open doorway still in view. He wears a long brown overcoat, black hat and plaid scarf as if he is ready to exit the space at a moment's notice. Matisse is presented as the authority figure in the space. Images like this would be hard to put out of one's mind when encountering the Chapel for religious services. Through examination of Matisse's physical presence in the space, it becomes

¹ "Editorial," *Liturgical Arts* 20 (February 1952): 43.

² Photograph can be found in "Art: Henri Matisse," *Life*, November 26, 1951, 108. Accessed on April 7, 2014 through http://books.google.com/books?id=g1QEAAAAMBAJ&pg=PA108&source=gbs_toc_r&cad=2#v=onepage&q&f=false

clear that the Chapel has been constantly navigating its dual role as a place for religious worship and an art monument since its creation. The consideration of other human bodies that occupy the Chapel space, their absence, presence, and interactions, can further illuminate this complex interplay. This is what I designate, for the purpose of this paper to represent an embodied approach to studying a space. A consideration of these human bodies, their interface with modern art and with each other, will complicate the narrative perpetuated by scholars about the Chapel, a narrative that also ignores the human cultural and functional changes that have occurred since the chapel's consecration. This paper engages in both a diachronic and synchronic analysis of the embodied experience in the Vence Chapel to show the nuances of the site's significance that have been overlooked by other scholars.

Despite its publicity in the popular press, scholars approach the Rosary Chapel at Vence and its complex interior in a piecemeal, reductive manner that can often result in an oversimplified reading of the space. Most scholars emphasize the broad story of the chapel's creation in relation to Matisse's biography in an interest to advance the mystique of the artist. Other scholars focus their attention on single artistic elements such as the stained glass windows or murals as the focal feature of the space, discussing the methods by which these were created and how natural light impacts these components of the space.³ A great deal of scholarship about

³ The broad story of the Chapel's creation is emphasized in Rebecca Spence "Matisse and the Nun," *ARTnews*. New York: ARTnews LLC, 12/01/2005. Web; Sister Jacques Marie's book *Henri Matisse: The Vence Chapel* (New York: Abbeville Publishing Group, 1999); Gabrielle Langdon, "'A Spiritual Space': Matisse's Chapel of the Dominicans at Vence," *Zeitschrift für Kunstgeschichte* 51. 4 (1998): 542-573; Marcel Billot, "Matisse and the Sacred" in Henri Matisse, M.A. Couturier, and L.B. Rayssiguier, *The Vence Chapel: An Archive of Creation* (New York: Abbeville Publishing Group, 1999); Hilary Spurling, *Matisse the Master: A Life of Henri Matisse: The Conquest of Color 1909-1954* (London: Alfred A Knopf, 2005) 448-460; Jack Flam, *Matisse on Art* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995) 191-194, 196-199, 212-213; Alfred H. Barr, *Matisse His Art and His Public* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1951)

the Chapel depicts the space almost exclusively through pictures that do not have people in them, further underscoring a lack of consideration of the human encounter with the space.⁴

Much scholarship on the Chapel centers around the idea of Matisse's art as decoration. Amy Goldin discusses the simplified imagery of the chapel as "mere" and "intellectually vapid" decoration.⁵ She sees value in this, despite her harsh words, for its ability to create a calming, unified environment that leaves room for rational investigation. Goldin disregards the idea that the program of the chapel can be conceptually complex given the simplicity of Matisse's decoration of the space. Gottfried Boehm, Remi Labrusse and Oliver Berggruen⁶ assert that the cut-out method used by the artist to create the Chapel's decoration results in art that is more complex than Goldin leads on. They maintain that decoration involves a different way of looking and participating that leads to further depth in its meaning. Ingrid Pfeiffer and Shirley Neilsen Blum likewise acknowledge the complexity of meaning that can be gleaned from decoration, while taking their analysis further to demonstrate the effect that the temporal element of sunlight

279-286. The imagery and light in relation to Matisse's methods are emphasized in Shirley Neilsen Blum, "The Triumph of the Final Years, 1944-1951" in *Henri Matisse: Rooms with a View* (London: Thames & Hudson, 2010) 128-134; *Henri Matisse: Drawing with Scissors: Masterpieces from the Late Years*, ed. Oliver Berggruen and Max Hollein (New York: Prestel, 2002) 67-140; René Percheron and Christian Brouder combine these two approaches in *Matisse From Color to Architecture* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 2002) 123-261.

⁴ An image of the Chapel space photographed without chairs or people can be found in *Henri Matisse: Drawing with Scissors: Masterpieces from the late years*, 130.

⁵ Amy Goldin, "Matisse and Decoration: The Late Cut-Outs," *Art in America* 63.4 (July/August 1975): 51.

⁶ Gottfried Boehm, "Expression to Decoration: Henri Matisse in Quest of Himself," in *Matisse Figure, Color, Space* ed. Pia Müller-Tamm et al. (Ostfildern-Ruit: Hatje Cantz, 2005) 277-289. Remi Labrusse, "Decoration beyond Decoration," in *Henri Matisse: Drawing with Scissors: Masterpieces from the Late Years*. ed. Oliver Berggruen and Max Hollein, (New York: Prestel, 2002) 67-85; Oliver Berggruen "Resonance and Depth in Matisse's Paper Cut-outs" in *Henri Matisse: Drawing with Scissors: Masterpieces from the Late Years*, 85-128.

through the stained glass has on the space.⁷ Overall these scholars advance the notion that the elements of the Vence Chapel are capable of conveying more, contradicting Goldin's designation of the decoration as "vapid". However, none extend their argument to acknowledge how meaning is created by the interaction of decorative elements and people in the Chapel.

Human bodies occupy the Vence Chapel almost constantly, but you would not know that from previous scholarly approaches. These bodies and their different purposes for occupying the space are able to reveal a rich narrative omitted from previous accounts. Some scholars provide a hint of the importance of people in the Chapel but subsequently fall short of conveying how significant these human agents are in the space. At first glance, the study by René Percheron and Christian Brouder, *Matisse from Color to Architecture*, looks like it will attend to the missing bodies in the space in their chapter, "Step by Step." However, it does not. The portion of the extensive text that pertains to the Chapel follows the existing pattern, emphasizing the light of the stained glass windows and conveying a narrative of the artistic process. It presents an idealized view of the Chapel through photos that are taken from vantage points which a typical viewer would not be able to access and depicts the space devoid of people.⁸ Like other scholars, the detailed discussion of the chapel program breaks each image down into its component parts and discusses the imagery of the stained glass windows and chasubles.⁹

⁷ Ingrid Pfeiffer, "Windows in the Chapel of the Rosary in Vence," in *Henri Matisse: Drawing with Scissors*, 128-140 and Shirley Neilsen Blum, "The Triumph of the Final Years, 1944-1951," 128-134.

⁸ Photographs from Percheron and Brouder *Matisse From Color to Architecture* which demonstrate this include that of the nun's entrance from the garden, inaccessible to regular public (139) and that of the view from priest's location in the Chapel, behind the altar (196-197).

⁹ This strategy is even taken by Dominique Szymusiak who discusses the most human embodied element of the Chapel, the chasubles, doing so as if they are entirely separate from the rest of the space. Dominique Szymusiak, "Chasubles: 'The purest and most radiant works ever created by

One exception to the group of scholars who attend to the Chapel in a piecemeal way is Gabrielle Langdon, who acknowledges that this work by Matisse is an architectural space that requires participants. Langdon examines in-depth Matisse's precursory studies for the murals of the Chapel and concludes that many of the artist's contributions have been influenced by the Dominican tradition. Her article stands in contrast to those by other scholars such as Aragon and Schneider who deny the religious quality of the space.¹⁰ Langdon explains that Matisse is well versed in the Dominican ritual needs and designed the Chapel accordingly; however, she does not actually analyze the various roles that multiple rituals play in the human interactions of the Chapel space. While indebted to her discussion of the Dominican religious ritual use of the Chapel at Vence, this paper examines other rituals that take place there, extending our understanding of this site in rich and complex ways. Ritual is defined more broadly as "any prescribed system of proceeding."¹¹ In this sense, 'ritual' here can pertain to that of the artist's process, and the tourist's desire to experience a new site, in addition to the religious worshiper's encounter.

My study is unique in attending to the prominent roles participants assume in the space, which have hitherto been overlooked. It would be hard to believe that the initial popular and scholarly media frenzy surrounding the Chapel at the moment of its consecration did not draw visitors to the space right away. Tourists, specifically art-focused tourists, have prescribed

Matisse', " and "The Colour of Ideas: Chasuble and African Fabrics" in *Matisse His Art and His Textiles: Fabric of Dreams*, (London: Royal Academy of Arts, 2004) 62-73 and 155-178.

¹⁰ Louis Aragon, *Henri Matisse, roman* (Paris: Gallimard, 1998) and Pierre Schneider, *Matisse* (New York: Rizzoli, 1984) as cited by Marcel Billot, "Matisse and the Sacred" in Matisse, Couturier, and Rayssiguier, *The Vence Chapel*.

¹¹ Susan Preston, "Ritual" in *Critical Terms for Art History*, eds. Robert S. Nelson and Richard Shiff (University of Chicago Press, 1996) accessed online. 05/27/2013
<http://search.credoreference.com.pitt.idm.oclc.org/content/entry/uchicagoah/ritual/0>

systems of encountering a new site whether they are aware of them or not. These socially constructed rituals differ from those proscribed by religious practice. Understanding how the two continually intersect at Vence will reveal a more complex understanding of the Chapel space.

Taking this embodied approach to the Chapel emphasizes elements of the space that do not fit as neatly into the standard narrative of Matisse as the revered painter. Scholars for the most part disregard the temporal, non-fixed, active elements in the space: the chasubles of the priest, the habits of the nuns, and the chairs for the laity.¹² These elements, which were designed by Matisse, are all integral to how the individual body experiences the space. This personal encounter involves bodily movement, proscribed action, and the engagement of several senses.¹³ These temporal, human-based elements of the Rosary Chapel, in addition to its present day multi-functionality, make evident that the space needs to be analyzed in a way that addresses how bodies interact with imagery, materials, furnishings, and other bodies in that space. Due to this multi-functionality and the vitality of the space today, the site continues to actively produce new meaning. Through a consideration of the human use of the space at the historical moment when it was first produced and how it is used presently, new narratives will be revealed.

Matisse's decorative works in the Chapel accompany the life in and of the space and therefore inform us about the people who have occupied or still occupy it.¹⁴ In this sense, this

¹² The chasubles are vestments for the priest to wear during various religious rituals and the artist stated that the habits of the nuns play a key role in the composition of the space.

¹³ Mark Paterson, "More-than visual approaches to architecture. Vision, touch, technique," *Social & Cultural Geography* 12.3 (May 2011): 263- 281.

¹⁴ My interest in thinking about Matisse's work in the Chapel is influence by how other authors have considered space in his paintings. In this instance Remi Labrusse's reading of Matisse's decorative paintings as images that accompany life, rather than represent it is of note. Remi

study of the Rosary Chapel in Vence combines the approaches of an anthropological investigation of non-verbal communication and art history. As David Summers thinks “works of art back into their first spaces of use,”¹⁵ or as Nicole Boivin discusses ritual rhythms in Rajasthan Villages and Neolithic Çatalhöyük,¹⁶ my focus on studying the Chapel is on the interactions of people and imagery within the space. These authors observe or recreate the interactions of human bodies with the built environment to better understand the function of an architectural site and the works of art housed therein. This paper adopts this method, examining how artifacts of worship created by the modern artist Henri Matisse, employed and observed by human participants, result in ritual use at the Rosary Chapel in Vence which is both religious and touristic throughout the building’s history. Through this approach, a more nuanced understanding of the Chapel and how these practices have changed in the last sixty years will emerge.

Labrusse, “The End of the Image Culture: Some Remarks on the “Symphonic Interior,” in *Matisse: Figure, Color, Space*, 302.

¹⁵ David Summers, *Real Spaces: World Art History and the Rise of Western Modernism* (New York, NY: Phaidon Press, 2003), 356.

¹⁶ Nicole Boivin, “Life Rhythms and Floor Sequences: Excavating Time in Rural Rajasthan and Neolithic Catalhoyuk,” in *World Archaeology*, 31.3 Human Lifecycles (Feb 2000): 367-388, Accessed Online 03/10/2014 <http://www.jstor.org/stable/125107>

2.0 THE NEED FOR AN EMBODIED APPROACH

The appearance and intentions of human participants in the Chapel has changed over the course of its sixty-three year life. The initial intent of the Chapel was for it to be primarily occupied by nuns, priests, and parishioners. Despite the possibility that some of these initial parishioners were really tourists, attending the Chapel because it is a work by Matisse, they would have been required to engage in religious services to have access to the space. Today, the space navigates its traditional function as a tool for religious worship with nuns, costumed priest, and parishioners with its role as a tourist site explicitly pronounced. Non-religious visitors can now attend the space for a fee to experience the artwork of Henri Matisse and are not required to attend a religious service in the space. The interplay between tourists and religious attendants at the Chapel today add complexity to discerning the significance of the chapel in the contemporary context.

There is a problematic disconnect between how this inhabitable space designed by Matisse was encountered when it was first created and how it is encountered today. This disconnect is largely due to ideological shifts in the Catholic Church after Vatican II and changes to the use of the convent site, including the interjection of the tourist. According to David Summers' thinking about *Real Spaces*, "an artifact is rooted in the particularity of the occasion of

its making.”¹⁷ However no artifact is frozen in a singular context, cultures change constantly. For this reason it is vital that art historians consider both the diachronic and synchronic contexts of an artifact.¹⁸ Summers argues that though we are separated from the original context of making, we are able to connect to artifacts through our basic human physicality. Both creators and contemporary observers have a body that inhabits and interacts with our direct environment and that simple fact allows us to connect in some way to the context by which the site or object came into being.¹⁹

In the situation at hand, the Vence Chapel is an artifact containing artifacts. Both the Chapel as a whole as well as the particular elements contained within it are removed from their original cultural and historical context of creation. As a result, this analysis begins with the structure and its contents, thinking first about the original needs and purposes of this space before considering the rituals that transpire here presently. The architectural structure of the building was a collaboration of Matisse, Brother Louis-Bernard Rayssiguier (of the Dominican Order), Milon de Pélion (a local Nice architect), and Auguste Perret.²⁰ The inclusion of Perret in the consulting role places the Chapel in conversation with other modern church structures that share a material and typological heritage with it.²¹ The Vence Chapel building differs significantly from the traditional Catholic Church type and therefore requires a different level of

¹⁷ David Summers, *Real Spaces: World Art History and the Rise of Western Modernism*, 73.

¹⁸ “Diachronic that is through time” including the past coexists with the synchronic which focuses on the current moment. Ibid, 72.

¹⁹ Ibid, 36.

²⁰ Louis Bernard Rayssiguier initially approached Matisse about being involved in the chapel project. Auguste Perret was brought in as an advisor on the structure of the Chapel. Local architect, Milon de Pélion, also played an advisory role in the technical aspects of construction. As described in Matisse, Couturier, Rayssiguier, *The Vence Chapel: An Archive of Creation*, 77, 240.

²¹ Such as Perret’s Eglise du Raincy or Le Corbusier’s Notre Dame du Haut that break from the traditional church type in various ways.

awareness on the part of the attendant. Like all social spaces, the Rosary Chapel has its own “architectural correctness” which communicates how the space is supposed to be used by certain people. It is an acculturated code communicated to the viewer simply through the elements of the space and its arrangement.²² People can follow a building's “architectural correctness” because the features of a space correlate to general social norms and common rituals.

In the case of a building housing Catholic worship, such as the Vence Chapel, the social norms and common rituals expected of the space stem directly from the traditional Church type of architecture. These are the places that established a rigid and seemingly unchanging code for interacting in religious space. This code is set through certain “place marking devices,” such as the spire or the image of the crucifix, which guide our expectations when encountering a space for the first time by visually and symbolically connecting it to previously experienced spaces with these markers.²³ In both the time of the chapel's creation and the present day context, Gothic cathedrals and churches have always been a large part of Catholic visual culture. The Vence chapel maintains Church traditions through the traditional iconographic subjects depicted, the use of colored light to evoke spirituality, and its maintained ritual use by the Dominican Order. At the same time, the Vence Chapel diverges from those traditions. This is primarily indicated by the paths visitors follow within it (which will be detailed below). This separation from prescribed practice shows an attempt to communicate something different from the norm to the attendant.

Architectural elements that communicate to participants are classified into two categories: fixed features, marked by unmoving boundaries, and semi-fixed features, which

²² Preston, “Ritual.”

²³ Kent Bloomer and Charles Moore, *Body Memory and Architecture* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1977) 83.

constitute moveable objects.²⁴ The fixed features of the Vence Chapel are the walls and their murals, the stained glass windows, the seating and screen of the nun's choir, and the altar.²⁵ The space of the chapel is quite small, twenty feet wide in the nave and thirty-five feet across from the apse to the nun's choir.²⁶ The altar area is distinguished by a single step elevation from the rest of the room. The south and west walls are lined with tall, vertical stained glass windows designed in geometric and floral patterns, while the north and east walls consist of white tile murals with painted black line figures. The space has several areas, demarcated by boundaries, that can or cannot be occupied by certain people at different times. The semi-fixed elements of the space include the chasubles, the habits worn by the nuns, the chairs occupied by the laity, and other minor liturgical elements. The combination of spatial restriction and the importance of bodies to the semi-fixed elements of the space justifies the need for an embodied analysis of the space that considers the implications of these boundaries and actors within them.

Though the space clearly emphasizes the importance of natural light through the stained glass windows, there is also electric lighting to accommodate religious worship at night or on cloudy days. Hence practicality and functionality intertwine with pure aesthetic choices. The nuns, who still live in a building next to the Chapel, require this element to maintain the religious use of the space. The inclusion of electric lighting reminds attendants of the multi-functionality of the Chapel and the fact that it is in almost continuous use both by visitors and the people who live and work there.

²⁴ Edward T. Hall, *The Hidden Dimension* (Garden City, New York: Doubleday, 1966) 97, 101.

²⁵ An image of the layout of the Chapel can be found in Gabrielle Langdon, "'A Spiritual Space': Matisse's Chapel of the Dominicans at Vence," 544. An image of the habited nuns in the choir of the Vence Chapel can be found in Matisse, Couturier, Rayssiguier. *The Vence Chapel: The Archive of Creation*, 391.

²⁶ Dimensions of the Chapel as described in Gabrielle Langdon "'A Spiritual Space': Matisse's Chapel of the Dominicans at Vence," 555.

The imagery of the chapel can also be read as demanding an embodied analysis. Matisse's imagery for the Vence chapel is very flat, there is little to no sense of pictorial depth in the highly abstracted line drawings rendered on white tile with black paint or the stained glass windows designed in his cut-out style.²⁷ Matisse's cut-out method for the windows allows the viewer "to experience an all-over visual effect which draws the eye away from the picture surface to the total environment" according to Labrusse.²⁸ The viewer of the fixed-feature imagery in the Chapel is less likely to imaginatively 'enter' into the virtual world Matisse creates in the murals than in more traditional religious pictures because of the lack of recessional depth. The interaction of light on the flat murals keeps the visitors' mental projection of the self and the body within the physical space of the chapel.

When emphasizing the role people play in the Chapel space, clothing emerges as a key element of analysis, particularly that of the Chapel's regular inhabitants, the nuns and the priest. The costumes of these participants were at one point or another contemplated by Matisse as an element of the Chapel's composition. This fact and Anne Hollander's canonical scholarship on the charged meaning of clothing counters the notion that fashion is a lesser art, a mere accessory, particularly when related to the Chapel space. "Clothing may be thought to claim the more serious kind of attention given to architecture...it might be quite correct to consider a garment as

²⁷ Three large-scale tile murals dominate the walls opposite the stained glass windows. They are all simplified black line abstractions of iconography traditionally found in Christian spaces of worship. The mural entitled *St Dominic* is placed behind the wall facing the choir seating for the nuns. The mural entitled *Virgin and Child* is on the north wall. *The Way of the Cross* is on the east wall, which also has a doorway for the entry and exit of parishioners. The windows infuse blue, green, and light yellow into the monochromatic tile images.

²⁸ "For Matisse [the cut-outs] legitimacy as visual products was primarily based on their function, and this function was to vitalize the space where everyday life is conducted." Remi Labrusse, "Decoration beyond Decoration" in *Henri Matisse: Drawing with Scissors*, 80.

an aesthetic but useful artifact.”²⁹ The garments in the Chapel are therefore far more integral to the function and meaning of the space than previous scholarship has acknowledged. A consideration of the enrobed body must play a significant part in an analysis of the embodied experience at the Chapel.

²⁹ Anne Hollander, “Preface,” in *Seeing Through Clothes* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993) xiv.

3.0 EMBODIMENT BEFORE VATICAN II

This next section looks to examine the complex meaning of the Chapel in the socio-cultural context in which it was planned with attention to the role of the participants. The most significant aspect of this time period, which causes the chapel as planned to differ from the experience of it today, is that its consecration in 1951 predates Vatican II, a drastic restructuring of the Catholic Church's practices that institutionalized a greater emphasis on the parishioner's role in the Church.³⁰ It is strongly characterized by allowing for the speaking of colloquial languages for mass, reorganizing the authority of the church, and eliminating the requirement that habits and other monastic vestments be worn. The Vence Chapel in its planning clearly incorporates pre-Vatican II norms.

With this key historical consideration in mind, the layout of the Chapel space can tell us much about the social interactions of participants at the time of its consecration. In her study of religious women, Roberta Gilchrist argues that church space can express and display personal and social identities.³¹ The layout indicates designated entrances showing the social separations

³⁰ Nigel Yates, *Liturgical Space: Christian Worship and Church Building in Western Europe 1500-2000* (Burlington, VT: Ashgate 2008) 135-155.

³¹ "Space becomes a map in which personal identity and boundaries between social groups are expressed." Roberta Gilchrist, *Gender and Material Culture: The Archaeology of Religious Women* (Routledge, NY: 1994) 150.

of nuns, priests and the parishioners.³² Once they enter through specified doorways, the groups are relegated to occupy only certain areas of the space. For example the priest is not to enter the nuns' choir, as the nuns are not to enter the space of the laity. The spatial arrangement reinforced the prescriptions of the pre-Vatican II Dominican Order as they related to a more rigid hierarchical system.

Matisse designed the space to be functional for the people who would use it, particularly the nuns who inhabit the associated convent. His focus on their role is due to the fact that his initial involvement in this project stemmed from his personal relationship with a woman who served here.³³ The emphasis on the nuns is also justified because these religious women would be participants in the space on a daily basis, both in group and individual contexts.

The daily work of the nuns was initially occupied largely by caring for girls with tuberculosis in the Foyer Lacordaire, attached to the chapel through a walkway. This leads to an interesting connection between the aesthetic of the Chapel and theories of treating that disease. Tuberculosis was said to “thrive best in dirt, gloom, and fowl atmospheres.”³⁴ It is clear that Matisse strives for the opposite in the Rosary Chapel space. The untraditional white and highly polished tile used on the walls and floor, in addition to the flood of colored light, is quite a removal from an urban environment contaminated with visual and auditory overload, conditions

³² A plan indicating these features can be found in Gabrielle Langdon, “‘A Spiritual Space’: Matisse’s Chapel of the Dominicans at Vence,” 544.

³³ Matisse moved to the town of Vence in 1943 because of the threat of bombing in Nice. Prior to this, he underwent stomach surgery in 1941 and required extensive care. He hired and befriended a young night nurse, who eventually joined the convent and became Sister Jacques Marie. The two kept in contact through letters and when the Sister heard of plans to construct a chapel, she suggested Monsieur Matisse. In the process of designing the chapel, Matisse was advised by two men of the Dominican Church, Brother Rayssiguer and Father Couturier.

³⁴ Alfred Hiller M.D., C.M. *Tuberculosis: Its Nature, Prevention and Treatment with Special Reference to the Open Air Treatment of Phthisis*. (New York: Cassell and Company, Limited, 1900) 114.

thought to foster the disease. The parishioners enter a dirt-less, light-filled, pure space of spiritual, emotional, and potentially physical healing, supported by art. The white tiles of the walls and floor liken themselves to the sterilized environments found more frequently in hospitals and bathrooms than in churches. The colors of the chapel also subtly offer relief from a long day caring for girls with the illness often characterized by coughing up blood. There is no red in the designed Chapel space (with the exception of certain chasubles, when that color is required by tradition). This exclusion of red and the emphasis on a peaceful and clean space washed with colored light created a spatial environment in which the nuns could reflectively go about their worship without visual reminders of the rest of their work.

In addition to using the space for their own private devotions, the nuns occupy the Chapel when it is open to the public for Mass. At this time the nuns have a liturgical and performance role in the space. Matisse wanted to emphasize the voice of the nun in the religious ritual. He did so by insisting that the space not have an organ or other liturgical instruments. Only the bell in the steeple and the chanting of nuns and laity fill the space with music.³⁵ At the time of the Chapel's consecration, the chanting of the nuns, and the entirety of the religious ceremonies in the space would have been employed Latin. Therefore the nuns would have mostly interacted with Catholics in the Chapel space, as non-Latin speaking individuals would not have been able to fully participate in the religious practices.

Matisse reinforces the importance of the nuns by including their habits as a key compositional element of the chapel.³⁶ His highly colorful design for the chasubles, clothing worn by the priest when presiding over Mass and special services, starkly counteracts the simple

³⁵ Matisse, Couturier, Rayssiguier. *The Vence Chapel: The Archive of a Creation*, 55-56.

³⁶ Jack Flam, *Matisse on Art*, 130.

black and white of the habits. This acts in the same way that the colored windows balance the monochrome of the tiled murals. This emphasis on the presence of the nun is further reinforced in the visual documentation of the chapel's creation. Matisse is pictured working on an architectural model for the chapel with a small figurine of a nun placed in the model of the space.³⁷ These images show how these women in their stoic costume act conceptually as a constant element of the space. Though they are depicted in the models as having mobility about the chapel space, during worship these enrobed women would have been restrained to the choir area. They sit regally clothed and covered in colored light from the windows, even further associating their monochromatic garb with the black and white murals affixed to the walls. In theory, anyone who encountered the space would be doing so in the presence of a habited nun as it was and still is primarily their space.

Habits act to visually and socially differentiate these religious women from others. They reinforce the idea that by taking vows, *these* women are engaging in a “renunciation of personality, sexuality, and social status.”³⁸ They are giving up the identity they held previously in favor of that of the group. They become viewed less as an individual and more as an occupant of a religious role, taking on any and all associations others may have with that position.³⁹ Most of these affiliations and assumptions would be brought to mind simply with the adornment of the habit.

³⁷ Two examples of the nun figurine in the model of the Chapel can be found in *Matisse From Color to Architecture* (New York: Harry N. Abrams Inc, 2002) 146 and Gabrielle Langdon, “‘A Spiritual Space’: Matisse’s Chapel of the Dominicans at Vence,” 546

³⁸ Roberta Gilchrist, “Gender and Material Culture: The Archaeology of Religious Women,” 18.

³⁹ Though this is accompanied by many spiritual beliefs and new responsibilities to God and his people, from an individualist perspective it can be seen as reductive of the nun’s personal identity.

As mentioned above, the habits were not the only costume key to Matisse's composition. The chasubles were among the final elements of the chapel to be designed. Six chasubles have been realized for the space. Each of the six that exist today corresponds to a different part of the liturgical calendar or ritual event (such as a funeral).⁴⁰ The colors align with those traditionally worn during each of these seasons or rites.⁴¹ Only one chasuble will appear in the sanctuary space at a time; the others were kept in storage. Originally, church-goers would not have had access to all the garments at once, nor would visitors see the chasuble without the priest in it.

The function of the chasubles is to "vitalize the space where everyday life is conducted."⁴² They did so through their ability to relate to the enacting of rituals in the space. The emphasis on the clothing of the religious figures and the orientation of chairs towards an elevated focal platform creates a theatrical sense to the Chapel. The priest acts as the primary performer, while the chanting group of habited nuns serve as both a performative assistant and an audience. Dominique Szymusiak extends the association of religious ritual at Vence with theatrical performance by noting that the chasubles were the third set of costumes Matisse

⁴⁰ "The pink chasuble: worn during two Sundays in Advent and Halfway through Lent
The purple chasuble: worn in advent to prepare for Christmas and in Lent to prepare for Easter,
Color signifies penance
The red chasuble: the fire of divine love, worn during time of the Passion, All saints day, and day of martyrs
The green Chasuble: Worn on the first Sunday of Lent, Pentecost and thirty-two weeks of the year.
The white Chasuble: worn on Christmas and Easter season, and the holidays celebrating the Virgin Mary
The Black chasuble: used for Lent and funerals"

-Translated from notes taken at the Chapel on October 26, 2013.

⁴¹ Matisse was aware of these traditions when designing the garments because of his communication with Father Marie-Alain Courtier. Matisse, Couturier, Rayssiguier. *The Vence Chapel: The Archive of a Creation*, 396, 405.

⁴² Remi Labrusse, "Decoration beyond Decoration" in *Henri Matisse: Drawing with Scissors*, 75.

designed in his career, as he had previously worked on two separate productions with the Ballet Russe.⁴³ “In a similar way to the earlier commissions, the performance was fixed and he was to design the decor.”⁴⁴ The priest, like a ballet performer, had movements he must enact and a script he must follow in order for the service or show to be a success. He must adhere to traditional expectations or risk a disgruntled audience. The priest’s audience is likely more strict than that of the ballet, since they are relying on his performance to provide a sense of religious salvation, rather than pure entertainment. The chasubles assist in this staged sense of the space by making the priestly body an active element in the work of art. The human figure brings life to the woven compilation of silk threads and grants them a means of moving about the space.

The priest’s garments are far more elaborate and expensive than that of the nuns. The floral patterns and bright colors of the garment could generally be associated as feminine, as opposed to the simple, standardized garment worn by the nuns. The habit is almost comparable to the standardized male suit in its stark black and white columnar form.⁴⁵ In this way, the priest’s body is consumed by the expectations associated with the chasuble making him more of a *priest* than a person. The chasubles fulfill the human “need to be dressed- not just covered but

⁴³ Matisse designed for *Le Chant du Rossignol* and *Ballet Rouge et Noire* (Monte Carlo) both for the Ballet Ruse Company. Cited in the Chronology of Matisse’s Career presented by Alfred Barr, *Matisse, His Art and His Public*, 1954.

⁴⁴ Dominique Szymusiak, “Chasubles: ‘The purest and most radiant works ever created by Matisse’” in *Matisse His Art and His Textiles: Fabric of Dreams*, 64.

⁴⁵ The contrast of the singular, stable habit against the multitude of chasubles worn throughout the year corresponds with secular clothing in that “the gentleman’s suit achieved a stability of appearance in the face of the fickle femininity of fashion.” Leila W Kinney, “Fashion and Fabrication in Modern Architecture,” *Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians* 58. 3 (1999): 474.

invested appropriately according to [the] circumstances.”⁴⁶ In the environmental circumstances of the Vence Chapel, a basic embroidered chasuble will not suffice.⁴⁷

The garment for the priest in the chapel must indicate to the audience that he is the main focal performer of the religious rites. The bright colored and patterned look of the chasubles⁴⁸ equates them to Hollander’s description of folk dress. “Much of ethnic dress or folk costume... has the quality of making the wearer him-self into part of just such an artifact and reducing him to a symbol-bearing abstraction.”⁴⁹ The chasuble as a theatrical costume “conceals” and “dehumanizes” the priest while maintaining his authority as a performer.⁵⁰

Of particular importance in the Catholic Church is the fact that it is not just any individual saying that one’s sins have been absolved, but that the person doing so is educated and chosen to fill this role as a priest. The chasuble therefore acts as a uniform, standardizing the priestly role and de-emphasizing the individual in a similar way to the habit’s ability to remove personal identity. Though many priests may consider this role as a part of their identity, the fact that the Dominican church has a set script for each day of worship makes the priest replaceable. Another priest, an understudy of sorts, could replace the particular individual acting as the priest at any time and the show would go on. The color and elaborate design of the chasubles distract the viewer from the facial expressions of the priest. In doing so, the chasubles are simultaneously de-emphasizing the importance of the individual himself.

⁴⁶ Anne Hollander, *Seeing Through Clothes*, 237.

⁴⁷ An image of a priest wearing the Pink Chasuble in the Chapel by H  lene Adant can be found in *Matisse, His Art and His Textiles: The Fabric of Dreams* (London: Royal Academy of Arts, 2004) 67.

⁴⁸ Indicated by Dominique Szymusiak in “The Colour of Ideas,” 155-178.

⁴⁹ Anne Hollander, *Seeing Through Clothes*, xiv.

⁵⁰ “Costume that conceals, synthesizes or dehumanizes the body still cannot eradicate that essential physical accord between audience and actor. Ibid, 237.

Dressed in this uniform garment, the priest is the main spectacle in the religious services. In comparison to the simple white tile murals, white tile floors and basic wooden chairs, the priestly garment is bold in color and design. The Dominican Order, in particular, has a history of relying on “public preachers” trained with attentiveness to “the impression he himself makes on the audience.”⁵¹ The priest is manipulated by the setting, garb, and expectations to fit the parishioner’s ideal. His role as object of the gaze is thus similar to that more frequently associated with female models or performers in art. They both productively fulfill the role they are given and assist the beholder in his or her spiritual or creative journey.⁵² Priest, performer and model share the position of being subject to the potentially voyeuristic gaze of an audience.⁵³ The priest is thus on display for the duration of the worship;⁵⁴ even if the spectator’s gaze is not sexualized, it is reductive in the sense that it regards him as playing a narrow role.

In the same month as the end of Vatican II in December of 1965 the Chapel became registered as a historic monument of France. Through the French Ministry of Culture and Communication, the Chapel began to receive public funding to support its role as a cultural site,

⁵¹ Dallas Denery II, “The Preacher and His Audience: Dominican Conception of Self in the Thirteenth Century,” in *Ludus-Medieval and Early Renaissance Theatre and Drama, Vol. 8: Acts and Texts: Performance and Ritual in the Middle Ages and the Renaissance* (Amsterdam: Editions Rodopi, 2007) 19-20.

⁵² Susan Waller, *The Invention of the Model: Artist and Models in Paris 1830-1870* (Burlington VT: Ashgate 2006).

⁵³ On the dehumanization of female models by artists, Carol Duncan, “Virility and Domination in Early Twentieth-Century Vanguard Painting,” *Artforum* 12 (1973): 37.

⁵⁴ The priest, however, maintains status as a subject rather than object of the gaze because of his leading role in the worship service. This differs from Carol Duncan and Mary Bergstein’s discussion of female models in male dominated studio spaces. Bergstein says that women in the male studio space simply become objects because of how frequently different models would rotate through. Though the priest *could easily* be replaced by another individual to fill this role, this is typically done on a relatively infrequent basis. “The Artist in his Studio: Photography, Art and the Masculine Mystique,” *Oxford Art Journal* 18.2 (1995): 52.

one visited by tourists.⁵⁵ This also required there to be some public access to the site. Before this time, it is highly unlikely that there would have been opening visiting hours to the space that were not associated with religious ritual. Therefore tourists of the space were interwoven with the audience of parishioners, still only encountering the chasuble in relation to the habit and the space in relation to Catholic worship rituals. They would have been looking as tourists but going through the motions of hearing the messages of the religious ritual. This means that the nuns and priests were most likely not engaging with a wholly devotional audience but one that also included secular participants who would observe the worship in a different way. In December of 1965 the non-worshipping portion of this audience becomes a crucial part of the Chapel's function, as can be observed today.

⁵⁵ On December 28, 1965, "Chapelle de Dominicaines du Rosaire" and its works of art were registered to Le Ministère de Culture et Communication as "Monuments historiques." "Monuments historiques de Alps Maritimes" *Ministère de Culture et Communication de France*, Accessed 04/14/2014 at <http://www.culturecommunication.gouv.fr/Regions/Drac-Paca/Politique-culturelle/Conservation-regionale-des-monuments-historiques/Protections-au-titre-des-monuments-historiques/Monuments-historiques-des-Alpes-Maritimes>

4.0 THE TOURIST AND PARISHIONER'S VIEWING PATH TODAY

In addition to a general disregard for the embodied ritual of the Vence Chapel, previous scholarship does not address the site in its contemporary post- Vatican II context. When the changes in cultural practice over time are taken into consideration, the complexity of purpose and multiplicity of function revealed are able to enhance our understanding of the space. During two visits to the Chapel as a tourist and one as a religious parishioner in October 2013, I set out to document and understand the current interactions between humans and art in the Chapel and the meanings they add to the site. Of note, I found the two types of encounters – that of the tourist and that of the parishioner – to be intertwined in the physical relations one enacts with the space. The human body's interaction with space is similar in these two approaches but the mind's relation to the space and the people within it differs. The inhabitants of the chapel alter the environment in slight ways to produce two distinct ways of seeing the site.⁵⁶ Because of the complex interweaving of the two present day modes of experiencing the Chapel, the following analysis will detail the interactions of both the religious worshiper and the tourist simultaneously, pausing to note particular moments where their paths converge and diverge.

⁵⁶ “We are always looking at the relation between things and ourselves,” therefore when one identifies with the religious philosophies and practices of the chapel, he or she yields a different reading than one who identifies with the elements of the space as art. This also pertains to the gender identities of the visitors and their association with the space. John Berger, *Ways of Seeing* (London: British Broadcasting Company and Penguin Books, 1982) 9, 46.

Even before one arrives at the Chapel, there are indications of what kind of participant enters the space and how to do so. Vence is a medium sized town with a grocery store, book and magazine store, several cafes, and other features common to small French Mediterranean communities. There are very few other attractions that would draw non-art-minded tourists from more popular towns in the area such as Nice or Antibes.⁵⁷ However, on several major roads leading to the town, there are signs reading “Chapelle du Rosaire, Matisse.” These signs direct foot and vehicle traffic to the Chapel in the same manner as they would for a museum or historical monument. This signage indicates that tourists are common and desired attendants of the Chapel and that, judging by the inclusion of the artist’s name, they will be interested in the space as an art monument.

The experiences of the tourist and the religious worshiper differ even from outside the chapel grounds. Approaching the chapel on the sidewalk for Mass, one hears the bell ringing in the steeple. People gather outside of the gate to the courtyard waiting to be let into the service. A nun greets parishioners at the gate and shakes each person’s hand as she welcomes them into the space. It is clear that several people in the group of parishioners waiting to enter are regular attendants since they ask questions indicative of personal relationships regarding specific members of the convent community. When approaching the Chapel as a tourist, however, the gate is already open and visitors walk directly into the burnt-orange tiled courtyard.⁵⁸ Without a personal greeter or a crowd of people with whom to interact, a tourist arriving when Mass is not

⁵⁷ “As for the Chapel’s visitors, judging from their comments in the Chapel guestbook, most of them evidently feel that they have come to view a work of art rather than a church, but a work of art with a spiritual dimension.” Michael Taylor, “Translator’s Note,” in Matisse, Couturier, Rayssiguier. *The Vence Chapel: The Archive of a Creation*, 35.

⁵⁸ An image of the public entryway to the Chapel can be found in Percheron and Brouder, *Matisse From Color to Architecture*, 204

in session would need to look to the building itself for direction on how to interact with the site. The door to enter the building is humble compared to the grand portals of earlier French church architecture, which many tourists would have seen.⁵⁹ The undecorated white door on the chapel has a small plaque listing the hours of visitation and public Sunday Mass. The modest entrance equates more to that of a home than a religious monument. The tourist's approach is therefore slightly hesitant due to an acknowledgement that they are entering someone else's space, a space belonging almost intimately to the group of women that live there and subsequently private in appearance.⁶⁰

Upon entering, the visitor (either tourist or attendant of Mass) descends a modest staircase into the chapel. The width of the staircase makes it clear that the space is not intended to have a large number of participants. The descent into the space contrasts sharply from the traditional model, which would rather have ascending steps to enter a cathedral. The ascent in this prior model was thought to bring the visitor closer to God and had wide stairs to allow masses of people to attend services. The courtyard and the staircase are transition spaces, which indicate to the participant that he or she is entering a space that is unique in its aesthetic arrangement and the social behaviors expected therein.⁶¹ The "architectural correctness"⁶² of this space will be different from that experienced on a daily basis by either type of visitor. The gate

⁵⁹ Contrasting particularly to churches in Ile de France: Basilique du Sacre Coeur de Monmartre, Notre Dame du Paris, Saint Denis, Sainte Chapelle du Venciennes, and Sainte Chapelle.

⁶⁰ When visiting the chapel I talked with a Sister who explained to me that the chapel is her home, where she feels safe and happy.

⁶¹ Bloomer and Moore, *Body Memory and Architecture*, Chapter 8: Place, Path, Pattern, and Edge; Beatriz Colomina, "The Split Wall of Domestic Voyeurism," in *Sexuality and Space* ed. Beatriz Colomina et. al. (New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 1992) 73-128.

⁶² Susan Preston, "Ritual."

indicates to visitors that they are being allowed the privilege of entering this home-like space, a privilege that can be revoked by the nuns, as they have the ability to lock the gate.

At the foot of the staircase is a podium, the use of which shifts depending on the day of the week. On most days this is where an attendant sits to charge admission to the chapel and connecting galleries. On Sunday, the parishioner descends the stairs to meet another nun who hands out the program (or bulletin), which outlines the progression of the service. This difference in exchange is crucial to the subsequent interactions in the chapel. People do not pay to enter for the religious service, though the church is providing the *service* (in terms of an exchange of goods and services) of religious salvation. People however, are required to pay to enter the space as art viewers. Participants are distinguished after this moment as either fellow worshipers or patrons/ customers.⁶³ Although the service typically provided by a church is that of religious ritual, the *service* that is paid for in this Chapel is the experience of seeing Matisse's art and the guidance that is provided by nuns through this visual material on site.

The entrance hall containing the staircase, podium, and stoup (basin containing holy water for blessing) acts as a traditional narthex for a religious attendant and as a lobby area of a museum⁶⁴ or theater for the tourist. The small font to the right of the door to the sanctuary space

⁶³ Though tithing or giving an offering is expected within a religious service, the place and context in which the money is exchanged for the tourist experience is very different. The religious worshiper enters the space and sees Matisse's work but is not asked to pay for the privilege of being there. They are asked to pay out of the goodness of their heart, however much they are able, to support the community of nuns and their work. Tourists pay to enter and are categorized by age group in categories of how much they have to pay. Tourists are not provided the individual attention or flexibility based on personal circumstance that religious worshipers are.

⁶⁴ There would be little shock to readers of Carol Duncan and Alan Wallach that a church space can be read as a museum since "museums share fundamental characteristics with traditional ceremonial monuments." See their essay, "The Universal Survey Museum." *Art History* 3.4 (December 1980): 449.

is the only indication that this transition space is intended to prepare the participant for religious worship. On a day of worship, this font is used by almost all of the attendants. For tourists, it is the precursory space to the spectacle of art and artifact that they have paid to see, and includes the obligatory ‘no photography’ and ‘quiet please’ signs. The lack of decoration in this white walled space allows for a sort of cleansing of the visual pallet before entering the subsequent sanctuary space with more visual information, the ‘art’ the visitor has come to see.

The parishioner enters the open door of the worship space to sit in anticipation of the service or stand talking calmly amongst friends and acquaintances who similarly attend the church regularly. While waiting for all of the parishioners to arrive, the priest, dressed in his regular Sunday robes, moves about the chapel space greeting each group individually. In this way, it becomes clear that there are at least four different viewers of the space: the priest, nuns and regular parishioners who are familiar with it, and pilgrim parishioners, who attend with the goal of worshiping in *this* space as a special occasion.⁶⁵ By introducing himself to the laity without the chasuble, the priest establishes his individual identity before assuming his performative ritual identity. The priest then vacates the space and returns wearing a chasuble, prepared to begin the service.

The tourist, however, enters the sanctuary space during the visiting hours when this main room is devoid of many of the worship-assisting tools (chasubles, priest, bibles, hymnals, etc). The people I saw on my visit as tourist did not engage in personal prayer while visiting, an

⁶⁵ I do not include the “tourist” attending Mass in this contemporary moment because of the different access one has to the building if they attend the frequent visiting hours. These changes of access and path through the space will be discussed below.

activity often evident in other Catholic worship spaces.⁶⁶ They did not pray to images of saints as one might expect and there is no space to light a candle in prayer for Saint Dominic or the Virgin and Child pictured in the Chapel's murals. The whispers echo from the hallway and from families as they sit in thought, trying to discern the meaning of the *Stations of the Cross*. Despite the 'silence please' sign posted near the entrance to the space, there is an almost universal urge to discuss the contents of the chapel. A nun even facilitates this conversational and art-focused way of looking by offering visitors information about the site. She fields questions about the process of creation, how frequently the artist visited, and explains the abstract imagery (the *Stations of the Cross* in particular).

The nuns at Vence no longer occupy their time caring for girls in the Foyer Lacordaire since it has been closed with medical treatment for tuberculosis transferred to hospitals. Instead, these women serve the roles of on-site gallery attendant, education specialist, and gift shop cashier, functions that are enacted in museums. In today's interaction, the nuns play an active role in the visitor's interpretation of the chapel by providing information rather than being static visual and auditory elements of the composition. The new voice the nuns have in the interpretation of the Chapel is an example of how the space has changed since the early 1950s, this change is perpetuated in the religious worship also.

After re-entering the sanctuary adorned with the chasuble, the Priest welcomes parishioners and indicates that they should let the environment of the Chapel be an inspiration during the service. For a brief moment, they are directed to look at the space from a sort of tourist perspective. After the welcoming remarks, the service begins with a chant from a nun. On

⁶⁶ I am speaking of my observed experience of the chapel on the particular days I attended. This is not to say how all people experience the space but to demonstrate the complex interactions within it.

the day of my visit, it was the nun who had been leading “gallery talks” of the chapel space the previous day who began the service. By doing so, she is taking on an authoritative role in guiding attendants of Mass in the worship ritual, much like how she guides tourists in their ritual experience.

The nuns are more authoritative in both the tourist and the religious experiences of the Chapel today. When the habit became optional after Vatican II, many convents, including the community at Vence, began to allow the nuns to wear everyday clothes. The nuns reinstate their identities in the space by wearing clothing that is individually chosen, indicating that they are not limited to the compositional role in the space that was originally prescribed to them. By selecting their own clothes, the nuns are taking action in how they, as individual actors, are perceived.⁶⁷ The priest is now the only costumed participant in the religious service and the chasuble is no longer experienced in relation to the habits of the nuns. In addition, the audience is no longer clearly segregated by differentiating areas for the parishioners and the nuns. In the service I attended, parishioners who came in after seats in the laity area had been filled were prompted by the priest to fill the empty seats in the choir. The intermixing of the nuns and the laity in the choir space has muddled the formerly distinct separation of the two types of audience members, unifying them as a group.

In contrast, when the tourist visitors inhabit the Chapel, the layout is still distinguished by social hierarchy. They are roped off from the altar and choir space, separated from the spaces where religious rites occur. These spaces become frozen without active interaction. This separation makes these zones decorated spaces to be looked at from afar and admired, rather than

⁶⁷ “This [primary] function, in the main tradition of Western dress, is to contribute to the making of a self-conscious individual image, an image linked to all other imaginative and idealized visualizations of the human body.” Anne Hollander, *Seeing Through Clothes*, xiv.

inhabited for religious worship. The altar space and choir become, for all intents and purposes, an isolated installation in an art gallery, akin to an object in a vitrine in a natural history museum. Some visitors sat quietly looking at the space, but none with heads bowed in prayer.⁶⁸ There is no designated space for kneeling in prayer as one would expect from a space dedicated to religious worship. In this sense, the space, when opened to tourists, seems to be requiring from the visitor the same expected behaviors and actions as those proscribed for an art gallery.

During worship, the chanting of the nuns, the priest's sermon, reading of the gospel and all other audible elements of the service were spoken in the colloquial French. Pilgrim parishioners from other countries, possibly with other primary languages, are expected to adapt to the local normative language in this environment. In contrast, when the chapel is open to public tourists, there is an accommodation for those who do not speak French. The nun who sits in the chapel as a gallery attendant speaks French and English to communicate with them. This inclusion of a foreign language further associates the space with a tourist monument or museum, which offers text panels in several languages.

The museum aura is reinforced by the fact that when a tourist leaves the sanctuary space they enter into a hallway with framed images of Matisse, his drawings for the chapel, posters advertising his exhibitions, and other artifacts. The framed pictures and drawings act as a "place marker" communicating to the participant that the rest of the encounter in this building will be equivalent to attending a museum. The hallway leads to other small gallery like rooms and a gift

⁶⁸ This is not to say that people are not praying at all in the space, but if they are praying they are not doing so with the typically associated posture.

shop area. The chasubles are displayed in the first of the galleries,⁶⁹ and in the second one finds a model of one of the earlier versions of the stained glass windows.

There is a proscribed circulation for people in and out of these rooms through different portals when the chapel is used as an art gallery. People are not expected to back track or re-enter spaces. Their path through the space is socio-fugal, meaning that it is designed to move people through it quickly.⁷⁰ Tourist visitors exit through a staircase, which leads directly outside back into the courtyard. This path ensures they pass by the “gift shop,” a large desk with glass cases set up with books, pamphlets, and postcards available for purchase. In contrast, during a religious service, the doors to the gallery space and gift shop are closed and the lights in that area turned off. Visitors exit the same way they entered thereby avoiding many of the associations with museum space.

It is necessary, here, to consider more fully the presentation of the chasubles in the museum-like gallery setting because they show the dramatic contrast between the tourist and religious experience today. The chasubles can be experienced in a drastically different way than in the pre-Vatican II Chapel. Instead of adorning a singular mobile religious figure, they can now be seen collectively. Previously only seen adorned by a priest during Mass and other rituals, they are now hung in glass cases. Displayed broadly open upon the hangers, the vestment appears large and assuming, presenting the notion of clothing the authority figure of the Church.⁷¹ In the

⁶⁹ Initially planned as a storage space, according to the layout shown in Matisse, Couturier, Rayssiguier. *The Vence Chapel: The Archive of a Creation* 442-443.

⁷⁰ In contrast to socio-petal, which is a space designed to bring people together. Terms coined by Humphrey Osmond. Cited in Robert J. Maxwell, *The Context of Behavior: Anthropological Dimension* (Nelson Hall, 1983) 191.

⁷¹ An image of the Chasubles depicted in a flat manner, as they would be displayed on hangers, can be found in Percheron and Brouder, *Matisse From Color to Architecture*, 256.

vitrines, the chasubles are deprived tactility, motion and depth.⁷² They are shown frozen in time and isolated from the aesthetic environment for which they were designed (the sanctuary space). The chasubles were made using the cut-out method, which Matisse intended “to accompany collective or individual gestures” and particularly required a non-museum context.⁷³ One can move about these cases seeing the garments from both the front and the back, but the garments are deprived of their own agency and social context.

The chasubles in glass cases demand a different attention than the embodied garment in the Chapel space.⁷⁴ As they are suspended bodiless in cases, the tourist moves around them, looking not for religious redemption from a subject within them but looking *at* them, contemplating the aesthetic qualities that result from the artist’s creative process, rather than those that facilitate worship. The chasubles are a powerful signifier in the space of the Chapel but in this gallery they are mechanized and removed from the body that would animate them in the worship space. In their separation from this space, the vestments are presented as part of an artistic series. The garment’s presence in the sanctuary space enables its religious purpose; however in the vitrine the “worship” that transpires centers on the thing as a static art object.

⁷² The glass case acts in the same objectifying and distancing manner that Weiss describes when considering the photographs of Matisse artworks, instilling a separation from the nuances such as texture, for paintings, or movement, for the chasubles, which are crucial to the personal interaction with the work. Jeffery Weiss, “The Matisse Grid,” in *The Repeating Image: Multiples in French Painting from David to Matisse*, ed. Eik Kahng (Baltimore; Walters Art Museum, 2007) 183.

⁷³ “[The cut-outs] had to be integrated into a specific social context, where they would accompany collective or individual gestures.” Remi Labrusse, “Decoration beyond Decoration,” 80.

⁷⁴ McLuhan presents the idea that the medium in which any information is presented dictates the message we as the information recipients pull from it. Marshall McLuhan, *The Medium is the Message: An Inventory of Effects* (New York: Bantam Books 1967).

5.0 CONCLUSION

The introduction of new participants, particularly those who may not partake in the religious purpose of the chapel, has the ability to change the meaning of the space. The “touristization” that involves people paying to enter the space is associated with commercialization and, according to Paul Post “generally evokes a change of context for cultural elements in the sense of disqualification.”⁷⁵ Meaning that by accommodating tourists, a religious space becomes commodified, losing its spiritual significance. However, the Chapel does not fit the sell-out model proposed by Post. The Chapel is able to maintain its original ritual significance because it still functions as a religious worship site and home to nuns, while adapting to the requirement of allowing tourist visitors because the convent receives public funding as a historic monument. The Chapel is not only “touristized” but also museumized, taking on the contemplative, meaning-making attention that is usually found in the latter. Therefore the presence of the art tourist does not disqualify the space’s former significance but creates new meaning that layers with the old.

The museum encounter of the Chapel with the presence of the nuns as gallery attendants and the stagnant, glass-enclosed chasubles instills a different sense of spiritual elevation than the

⁷⁵ Paul Post, “Fields of the Sacred: Reframing Identities of Sacred Places,” in *Sacred Places in Modern Western Culture*, ed. Paul Post et. al. (Walpole, MA, Peeters: 2011) 47.

original worship function.⁷⁶ Spirituality deriving from this space as a museum is not the same as that sought in a religious service. In the same manner that a visitor moving through a universal survey museum is "prompted to enact and thereby to internalize the values and beliefs written into the architectural script," tourist visitors of the chapel move through the space with the mindset of the "sacred purposes of art," rather than the salvation purpose of religion.⁷⁷ Visitors in this art-focused context are not participating in the original ideological system of the Catholic Church but acting through the ideological frame of art history. Matisse's statements show he considered his artwork and the process of making it a spiritual experience akin to religion.⁷⁸ The artist here associates the act of making with spirituality, yet the act of occupying the space as realized Chapel must be accompanied by religious ritual in order to take on a full sense of spirituality.⁷⁹

As seen in previous scholarship on the Chapel, art historical approaches often champion the artist's narrative over the common human experience. The artist is mystified as a God-like creator in these accounts, and particularly assumed to be male in this time period.⁸⁰ His work is

⁷⁶ Matisse stated several times that his purpose in creating the Chapel was to instill a sense of spiritual elevation in anyone who attended the space. "It is important in our building that the mind's state of religious elevation should spring naturally from the lines and colors functioning in the simplicity of their eloquence." Matisse, Couturier, and Rayssiguier, *The Vence Chapel: The Archive of a Creation*, 90.

⁷⁷ Carol Duncan and Alan Wallach, "The Universal Survey Museum," 450-451.

⁷⁸ "My only religion is love of the work to be created and total sincerity." And "Do I believe in God? Yes, when I work" Henri Matisse quoted in *Modern Masters: Matisse*. Television Series. Directed by Mark Halliley, performed by Alastair Sooke. 2011, London: BBC. Accessed Online. 02/10/2013 at <http://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/b00sfsnd>

⁷⁹ When Matisse mentions wanting to instill a sense of "spiritual elevation" in the attendant of the Chapel he refers to the Church as an endeavor of "we" and "us" being Matisse and the religious collaborators he consulted heavily while making the Chapel. Matisse, Couturier, Rayssiguier, *The Vence Chapel: The Archive of a Creation*, 90.

⁸⁰ As discussed in depth by Linda Nochlin "Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists?" *The Feminism and Visual Culture Reader*, ed. Amelia Jones (New York: Routledge, 2003) 229-

presented as the product of an almost Christ-like savior alleviating the observer from the doldrums of the modern world. Though many art historians have debunked this type of mythologizing over the years,⁸¹ it seems it is still present when considering the art tourist and pilgrim who venture to far-away places to see masterful, soul cleansing works of art. The artist's word is often taken as the main authoritative source for deciphering the meaning of the artwork. This approach is fundamentally insufficient as, in any communication situation, the receiver of information determines the meaning of the message communicated. In art, this means that no matter the artist's intent, the viewer ultimately determines what message has been communicated and what meaning the work has to them. In saying this, I do not mean that we should in any way disregard the statements an artist makes about his or her work. Rather this study proves that focusing only on statements made by the artist and his or her contemporaries can result in missed opportunities to consider other complex conditions and experiences that arise over the long duration of a work of art.

Art historians are tasked with uncovering shared meaning that is able to enrich a particular understanding of the work of art. The broader goal of this is to gain further understanding of ourselves as human beings. No human actor exists in a world where they would have a uni-dimensional and isolated experience with a work of art. We encounter art with the other objects and human actors around it. Even in a catalogue entry on a computer screen, our experience of a work of art is determined by the environment our body inhabits. Those things

233. Mary Bergstein, "The Artist in his Studio: Photography, Art and the Masculine Mystique," 45-58.

⁸¹ Particularly feminist, Marxist, post-structuralist, and post-colonialist scholars looked to demystify the western male artist.

and people in our environment have an influence on the way we attend to and make meaning from art encounters.

This is especially true of architectural spaces such as Matisse's Rosary Chapel at Vence, in which meaning is directly related to its contemporary function and the multisensory experiences of the people within it. The nuns, priests, parishioners (both local and pilgrim), and tourists all play an active role in the Chapel's contemporary narrative, a narrative that builds in complicated ways on prior understandings of this site as it was constructed through scholarship which focused primarily on Matisse's role as a famous artist. In so doing, the ways the space adheres to religious tradition despite its modernist aesthetic and the seemingly mundane practices of common users was neglected. The people who inhabit and interact with the chapel are, in essence, elements of the composition. Because these people, their needs and expectations, change over time, Matisse's composition, the function of the Chapel, and its overall meaning shifts as well. The Rosary Chapel at Vence, like many other functioning architectural sites, demands a diachronic analysis mindful of the participants in the space. It is only through this embodied and historically sensitive approach that the complexity of how humans exist with and within our constructed, art-adorned environments can begin to emerge.

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